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Assad held disabled by heart attack

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Jerusalem — Israeli government sources say they believe that Syrian President Hafez el Assad has been incapacitated by a massive heart attack and cannot continue to serve in the office effectively.

Mr. Assad has become a pivotal figure in the Middle East since taking power from a civilian government in a bloodless coup in 1970, overriding resistance by the majority Sunni Muslim population in his own country.

He has become a formidable opponent of Israel and a key ally of the Soviet Union in the Middle East. His refusal to join the troop-withdrawal agreement with Lebanon last spring and to withdraw 50,000 troops from the eastern part of the country has proven a major stumbling block to a peaceful solution to civil strife there.

The Syrian government announced November 14 that Mr. Assad had entered a hospital in Damascus with appendicitis and that surgery forced the postponement of a meeting that day with Lebanese President Amin Gemayel on the troop-withdrawal issue.

Syrian television has shown Mr. Assad in brief news reports twice this week, though he did not speak on either occasion.

But in recent days Israeli intelligence sources, high-ranking military officers and other analysts have concluded that Mr. Assad, 53, is gravely ill and that full recovery is highly unlikely.

The sources said they are certain the Syrian president had a severe heart attack, not appendicitis, in mid-November. The Israelis said they

were sure Mr. Assad's appendix was removed in 1960.

"He's not dead yet, but he is very sick," an analyst said. "We believe Assad had a massive heart attack and if he lives, he will be incapacitated."

The Israeli sources said that Mr. Assad has a long history of medical problems. In 1982 he disappeared from public view for three months, and the Israelis believe he was in Moscow undergoing treatment for cancer.

"We knew just then how sick Assad was," said the intelligence analyst. That was when Israeli intelligence learned that his appendix had been removed more than 20 years before, he said.

"He could not tell his people what type of cover story to devise or that his appendix was already out," the analyst said. "They forgot to check with his doctors and we know the

good Lord does not give any man two appendix."

Having concluded that Mr. Assad is gravely ill, Israel is closely watching events in Syria for some indication of who might be coming into power. But any clear answer to that question is hard to find.

"Assad never cultivated a successor because that person might have worked to overthrow him," said a Foreign Ministry official.

"If there is an announcement about Assad's death, it will be important who makes it — the army, his brother or any ministers," said Yosef Olmert, professor of Islamic studies at the Shiloah Institute in Tel Aviv.

"That will indicate who may take power. They should be too clever to allow violence between themselves now, for they fear a civil war. One must remember that if it is peaceful now, it is inevitable there will be trouble in the future."